Edison, His Life, His Work, His Genius. By William Adams Simonds. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1934. xviii + 364 pp. Notes, bibliography, and illustrations. $3.50.)

Thomas A. Edison was a taciturn man and hence hardly lent himself to a biography in the modern manner. Mr. Simonds treats the inventor in about the way he himself would doubtless have preferred; that is, in an extremely objective fashion that tells much of what Edison did but little about the man himself. That little must be read between the lines, or in the rare asides which contain something of self-revelation. There is, for example, Edison's remark that: "I don't care so much for a fortune as I do for getting ahead of the other fellows" (p. 139). He made the fortune for all that, established successful contacts with big business; and, as everyone knows, worked his way up from poverty to a point where his popular reputation surpassed that of any contemporary American scientist. One may say, without intending any disrespect, that his was the perfect Horatio Alger story among the records of American inventors.

This very success renders him a rather provocative figure to those who are interested in the history of science, and in the rôle which the process of invention may play therein. Was not this man a practical craftsman whose work was simply an application of principles discovered by the real research men? And is there not an obvious distortion involved in extending the highest recognition to a leader in "applied science," while the masters of pure science languish in relative obscurity? These are familiar questions and most readers have ready answers, one way or the other. The reading of the present biography, however, leads to the suspicion that the distinctions implied here are partly fictitious, and that the correct replies are not so simple after all.

In the first place, Edison possessed many of the qualities associated with the great scientist of any type. He had a highly original mind in dealing with difficult and even with abstract problems. The claims made for his tireless devotion to research — for the length of his working day — are almost unbelievable. (As a matter of fact, they have been questioned.) His work was recognized by the most distinguished scientific organizations both at home and abroad. One can hardly dismiss as "merely practical" the middle westerner who, when he arrived at Heidelberg in 1889, was honored by the German Association of Advanced Scientists at a banquet attended by no less than twelve hundred guests!

Edison, like other inventors, concealed his devices until he could secure patent protection which was likely to produce a personal income. In this sense, he fell short of the social ideal of the best type of scientist, but he was doubtless sincere in saying that the credit rather than the fortune most concerned him. The number of important devices or machines for which Edison deserves primary credit — incandescent light, the phonograph, the motion picture — is truly phenomenal. He necessarily built upon the findings of earlier scientists and inventors; and in his later years, nearly all his work was actually carried on by assistants. But Edison likewise made partial contributions which eventually were credited to others who followed them through. Most readers will be surprised to learn, for example, that he was one of the first to actually set up a wireless telegraph.

Mr. Simonds has provided a readable and stimulating volume. Unfortunately, the narrative is jerky at times, and the lay reader will find no adequate explanation of the technical side of the story. Both of these difficulties may be ascribed, to some extent, to the confusing multiplicity of Edison's own investigations.

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